

# The Relationship Between Form and Content in Early Grzegorz Królikiewicz Documentaries

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The documentary films completed by the eminent director Grzegorz Królikiewicz at the turn of the 1970s could at first sight appear to be less experimental than his feature films, and when compared with some of the radical formal solutions he resorted to, even traditional. Nonetheless, a careful examination of his earlier documentary work is worthwhile, especially since it could be argued this issue is much more complex in reality and that the work of Grzegorz Królikiewicz is one of experimental cinema that escapes this obvious classification. The contents of his films are often highly coded and it is in fact how the director portrays so-called reality that provides the true message of his documentaries. Between the form and content in the work of Królikiewicz, therefore, is where the narrative tension lies – at times even in conflict.

The documentaries by Grzegorz Królikiewicz can be divided into two groups. On the one hand there are the poetic films in which there is a particular emphasis placed on the clarity and expressiveness of the image, such as in *Brothers (Bracia)* 1971, or *Don't Cry (Nie płacz)* 1972. It is also possible to a certain extent to thus qualify too *Men (Mężczyźni)* 1969, his first independent work as a director – although in this film the issue of society at large is decidedly more important than a search for formal means. On the other hand, Królikiewicz, it could be said, developed his popular work in a captivating way, particularly in the cinematography of the 1970s with works such as *Faithfulness (Wierność)* 1969, or *Letter from a Murderer (List mordercy)* 1971, belonging to the genre of psychodrama.

In line with the chronology, one ought to begin with the psychodramas, for in terms of form they appear to be simpler and more

readily comprehensible. The short documentary *Faithfulness* by Grzegorz Królikiewicz was made as part of his studies at the film school in Łódź. It is a historical reconstruction of the earliest events of the Second World War, the battle at Wizna, which took place in September 1939. What, in this case, can one call a reconstruction? The tragic events are related by the participants – the few that survived. Moreover, not only do they tell the story but it would seem they play the part, reconstructing particular moments of the battle. All this – and in authentic locations where it took place.

In the first shot, a grey-haired old man can be seen – most likely a veteran, who leans out of the dugout and begins to sing his particular ballad on the fallen heroes of Wizna. It is only sometime afterwards that the credits appear. The camera sweeps a panoramic shot of the Wizna area, the endless fields where the bloody battle was waged. In the background a song can be heard all the time. The narration proper begins a little later. Several of the participants of this battle show the extent of the field of fire; men begin to bang their fists against a sheet of metal. The sound of pounding fists creates a fearful symphony of bullets, a veritable cannonade. The sounds that engage viewers in the atmosphere accompany an increasingly dynamic staging of shots: horses running, the hands of protagonists covering their faces in sheer fright, as before their very eyes they had images from those days.

And again a carbon copy: the camera finally takes a panoramic shot of the shelter and in the background the next stanza of the song can be heard. In the second episode one of the operation commanders talks about what took place. Here Grzegorz Królikiewicz resorts to an

editing effect reminiscent of Dennis Hopper's *Easy Rider* 1969, where parallel editing was used as a method of linking scenes. In *Faithfulness*, the officer's monologue is punctuated with the shots taken of others, who begin to speak later. In terms of the documentary filmmaker's so-called ethics, the frames of action where battle participants crawl along the ground, trying to reconstruct its course, may raise certain questions. One of the veterans, however, says an extremely important line for understanding the director's method: "When I reached the shelter I felt just as I do today". Królikiewicz attempts to lead his protagonists, in as much as it is possible, into a physical and psychological state that reflects the dramatic experiences from that time, thereby extracting emotions experienced in that period – ones set in the present, living time.

In the third episode, there is a change. In the third stanza of the ballad, two participants of the battle as if interrupt each other's story, which is accomplished with the aid of editing effects. Thus the final, dramatic moments are presented when the operation commander Captain Raginis commits suicide and those who survive are taken prisoner. The veterans, physically tired, breathe heavily, faces awash with perspiration. Królikiewicz and camera operator Mierosławski provide the viewers with the opportunity to see them in particular detail – the camera makes rather nervous moves, additionally providing a sense of anxiety and thus making viewers aware that for these veterans it is as if the events of the distant past are still alive. The nightmare continues.

Film critic Bogumił Drozdowski in his article on Polish documentary films of the 1970s, wrote the following on *Faithfulness*:

This is a unique film, a reaction to the so-called cinematographic career of talking heads. The film evokes both feelings of distaste and respect but most of all, authentic emotions. One does not forget such images and therefore the contents as well, which are highly compelling.<sup>[1]</sup>

[1] B. Drozdowski, "Zmiana warty" [Changing of the Guard], *Kino* 1974, no. 1, p. 21.

It should be remembered that the so-called talking heads were one of the characteristic traits of new documentary cinema at that time and that Grzegorz Królikiewicz was one of its most important representatives. Film critic Andrzej Michalak's article devoted to the 'Kraków School' and the landmark film Festival in Kraków in 1971, names Grzegorz Królikiewicz as the 'informal leader of the group'. As much as, according to Drozdowski, the film *Faithfulness*, completed in 1969, is far from the poetics of the above, it is in fact one of Grzegorz Królikiewicz's next films, *Letter From a Murderer*, that appears to realise this in full.

This 30 minute film was made for the television cycle *Facts Talk* and tells of a story of a letter sent to the National Council in Radom from an anonymous person from East Germany. In the letter the writer turns to the residents of the town and tells the story of his life; a German by origin who was raised in Radom and when the war started was an active Nazi... Giving shocking details of crimes that he committed, he asks for forgiveness... One needs to emphasise that the material in itself has an unusually strong impact, but Grzegorz Królikiewicz goes further and achieves a totally unbelievable, personal effect, for the letter is in turn read by the ordinary residents of Radom. Among them is for example a woman, the daughter of a man murdered by the Nazis – who knows, maybe the very writer of the letter? In fact, thanks to the inclusion of the personal experiences of such people, thanks to their commentaries, the film can be read as an artistic and personal development of the so-called talking heads formula.

The films *Faithfulness* and *Letter from a Murderer*, which may be termed historical despite the fact they also undertake issues reaching the contemporary, are a consequence of events in the past and its continual impact on people's lives. The two remaining documentaries by Królikiewicz, which are yet to be discussed, relate directly and exclusively to contemporary problems. Attempting to define the fundamental difference between the young documentary film makers of 'The Kraków School' and 'The

Karabash School', Michalak writes: "I think the most important difference is the consistent undertaking of young artists to engage in raising social issues and their striving for an uncompromising and razor sharp articulation of the truth".[2] This comment refers to the criticism of young documentary film makers, which finds particular expression in the films of Królikiewicz, and it is he who became responsible for sending *Men* and *Don't Cry* onto the 'shelves'.

The film *Men*, as already mentioned, the first professional film by Królikiewicz, is on first appearances an ordinary report on life in the army. At first one can see how young men say farewell to their family, friends and their beloved at the station. The prevailing atmosphere on the platform is reminiscent of a later film by Królikiewicz, *Don't Cry*, which shall be discussed below. After this scene, the protagonists suddenly turn to an account of life in the army unit. The day begins with the reveille when the soldiers rub their eyes and rise from their warm bunks to go to their assembly and exercises. These scenes are accompanied by the speech of an officer who with exaggerated enthusiasm relates how serving in the army is an honour and a source of satisfaction. The young men carry out a made up command, crawl in the mud, run in masks, remove them, and almost the entire frame is cloaked in smoke... And again there returns the voice of the officer-joker: "What it means to speak of professional things with professionals: I heard the word 'mask' and it sincerely gladdened everyone's heart!" Irony, it can be seen, is one of many devices used by Królikiewicz so as to reveal the truth on serving in the army.

In the second part of the film where the taking of the oath is shown, it begins with a general shot of the stairs where the young men sit and sing *Anna Maria*. Suddenly the song breaks off, there is a cut and in the shot from above the assembly of soldiers lined up can be seen. In this place the visual conception is particularly clear, as conceived by the director and camera operator. Thus there is a shift from a close up of the location to increasingly more distant ones, which was to show the graduation and inevi-

table stripping of individuality as far as these young soldiers were concerned. The director commented on his idea as follows: "It is important that the camera is ever more distant from their individualism, forms of difference, up to the impression of an anonymous ant that does the same as every other".[3]

The transformation of these young soldiers into one uniform mass is finally completed in the last frame, shot at a maximum distant location, where we see the young men in the snow with blankets. Off-camera the viewer can hear the response to the question of what army life is like – answered with little enthusiasm but of course not negatively: "Well that's the army for you, isn't it". Piotr Marecki rightly notices in the lengthy interview with the director: "It is possible to think [...] That *Men* is a film in the purely realistic convention – however, so that a process of discovery takes place, there is need for the particular form that you have given it".[4] It is only thanks to the planned approach taken by the camera, introducing a comment from off camera and a contrastive editing of features that there takes place "an uncompromising and razor sharp articulation of the truth".

The film *Don't Cry* to a certain extent continues the theme of *Men* for it also tells a story of young men who go to enlist in the army. From the formal aspect, however, this film is more complicated and sophisticated. In the approach to exposure, Królikiewicz used his favourite method of initiating "the film beyond the frame": more or less in the course of a minute against a white background (it is

[2] A. Michalak, "Przełom w polskim dokumencie – program artystyczny 'szkoły krakowskiej'" [A Breakthrough in Polish Documentary Cinema – Artistic Programme of the 'Kraków School'], in: *Kino polskie: reinterpretacje. Historia – ideologia – polityka*, eds. K. Klejsa and E. Nurczyńska-Fidelska, Rabid, Kraków 2008, p. 440.

[3] P. Kletowski, P. Marecki, *Królikiewicz: Pracuję dla przyszłości* [Working for the Future], Korporacja Ha!art, Kraków 2011, p. 245.

[4] Ibidem, p. 250–251.

possible to deduce that this is the sky) from somewhere, whereas from beneath in slow tempo people jump out and the viewer can see only their heads and shoulders. In the next image the protagonists answer the question as to who the main actors in the first shots are. At a distance in the location, the riverbank and a narrow strip of land can be seen along which run naked young men.

A significant part of the film was shot on a railway station platform – from where the train departs with the soldiers. This is an example of an unbelievably impressionistic approach to documentary film. It is no wonder that in the credits of this barely 10 minute long film there appear as many as three camera operators, masters of documentary camera work: Stanisław Niedbalski, Witold Stok and Jacek Tworek. One person alone would not be able to capture so many various moments and details so as to later allow the director to compose out of these an image of a full blooded mutiny, a carnival, which transforms into the farewell of friends. A minute before the finale, the entire soundtrack suddenly stops and then the complete sense of loss is noticeable on the faces of the protagonists, fear before the new unknown stage of life that awaits them.

In conclusion, it is noteworthy to make mention of yet another poetic documentary by Grzegorz Królikiewicz, *Brothers*, in which, of all the available early documentaries, the concept of 'beyond the frame' was most fully accomplished, being a part of the theory of surprises whose aim is to force the viewer to remain in suspense, to be thinking all the time.

Paradoxically the genre of *Brothers* in the *filmpolski.pl* webpage was described as a "sports film", which appears to be appropriate – though only to a certain extent. It is true the protagonists of this film are the Brothers Kubica – famous Polish gymnasts of that period – but in this film the viewer shall not see them, neither during training, nor during competitions. The main task that the director set himself was to show how enormous an effort and how much work is involved to reach the required results in sport – where mainly physical but also, importantly, psychological effort is required. So as to allow the viewer to feel this, the director shows in close-ups the faces of the brothers during training when one observes the other:

What does each of the three brothers in turn watch? From their reactions the viewer can deduce that they watch their brother in danger. The danger itself is not shown. Perhaps in this case my desire was to lead to such a possibility to the very end – that the fragments of reaction remaining in the pupils will be shown, and that we shall not show what their pupils are reacting to.[5]

It is possible to argue that such a formal approach is too radical. In fact, at a particular moment the viewer no longer notes the renowned sports men out there, which may present an obstacle in reception. On the other hand, the formal experiments of Grzegorz Królikiewicz were always driven by the desire to force the viewer to engage themselves in what they see and, in a similar vein, what they do not. This method, it would appear, has in no way lost its relevance, and in documentary film in the present-day it could well be applied more broadly.

[5] Ibidem, p. 251.